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Structure and tectonics of the Gunnedah Basin, N.S.W: implications for stratigraphy, sedimentation and coal resources, with emphasis on the Upper Black Jack group

N. Z Tadros

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**STRUCTURE AND TECTONICS OF THE GUNNEDAH BASIN, N.S.W. -
IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATIGRAPHY, SEDIMENTATION AND COAL RESOURCES,
WITH EMPHASIS ON THE UPPER BLACK JACK GROUP**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

N. (Victor) Z. Tadros

B. Sc. (Hons.) Geol and App. Geol. (Ain Shams Uni., Cairo)

Department of Geology
1995

Frontispiece:

Coloured image of residual Bouguer gravity anomalies of the Gunnedah and Sydney Basins and southern part of the Bowen Basin with wavelengths less than 120 km. The red colour equals high values and the blue represents the low values. The image shows the prominent Meandarra Gravity Ridge which runs along the axis of the basins. The ridge appears to be transversely displaced along north-east-oriented lineaments/trends. The image is provided by R.N. Walker of Geoimage Pty Ltd using data from the Australian National Gravity Data Base, established by the Australian Geological Survey Organisation (then the Bureau of Mineral Resources) and contains data from the New South Wales Department of Mineral Resources. The image has been published as a front cover photo in Tadros (1993b). See text in chapters 3, 4 and 5 this thesis.

ABSTRACT

The Gunnedah Basin has long been considered a foreland basin. This study found that the basin consists of several linearly arranged troughs defined by bounding longitudinal and transverse ridges and highs. These features, together with the distribution and type of the Early Permian sedimentary basin fill and the associated volcanic rocks, strongly indicate that the basin's origin is consistent with volcanic rift models. The Meandarra Gravity Ridge, which represents a significant zone of inhomogeneity in the upper crust caused by deep-seated dense mafic intrusions, provided a key tool for resolving the early history of basin development. The ridge is laterally displaced by low gravity transverse trends representing transfer structures which were active during rifting and thus bound rift compartments of varying size and subsequent thermal subsidence histories.

There is a striking correspondence between the high gravity anomalies and the trough areas which contain the thickest sedimentary pile (and hence maximum subsidence), and also between the low gravity transverse trends and the mapped transverse structural highs in the basin. These relationships, together with the linear arrangement of the troughs, enabled prediction of basement structure within areas of little or no borehole control, provided the basis for subdivision of the Mullaley and Gilgandra Sub-basins into structural subunits, and enabled prediction of basement faults which have little or no surface expression.

During the Early Permian, the volcanic rift-related transverse and longitudinal structures were the main source of sediment and effectively controlled and confined sedimentation to the trough areas (overlying the half-grabens). Thermal relaxation followed in the mid-Permian and caused basin-wide subsidence, widespread marine transgression and deposition of the Porcupine and Watermark Formations, but the rate of subsidence in the trough areas was still significantly higher.

The change to foreland tectonics in the mid-Permian provided a new source of sediment from the overthrust New England Fold Belt. Tectonic loading in the Late Permian caused subsidence of the eastern half of the basin and establishment of lacustrine conditions. Structural readjustment along the eastern edge of the cratonic Lachlan Fold Belt caused uplift of a forebulge and shedding of quartzose detritus to the Western Fluvial System which infilled the lake and expanded through the axial drainage via southwest-flowing tributaries. Fluvial incision of the underlying Western Fluvial and Lacustrine Systems and sediment intermixing are evident in the main channel complex. Influx of coarse detritus from the New England Fold Belt and westward movement of the basin axis caused south-westward migration of the axial drainage complex.

Widespread silicic volcanism in the New England Fold Belt region contributed large amounts of pyroclastic detritus to the basin-fill. A major phase of lateral compression and thrusting of the New England Fold Belt onto the craton caused structural readjustment and uplift, particularly in the north, and ended Permian deposition in the basin.

Although foreland loading of the thrust belt was the dominant cause of subsidence during deposition of the Late Permian Black Jack Group and the Triassic Digby and Napperby Formations, the inherent volcanic rift-related basement structural elements had a significant effect by varying subsidence rates in the different basement compartments and consequently on development, distribution and geometry of depositional systems, their component facies and peat accumulation, as well as on emplacement and distribution of igneous intrusions and extrusions in the basin.

In the Late Permian and Triassic, longitudinal structures were periodically reactivated as thrust faults resulting in uplift and erosion of much of the upper Permian sequence particularly in the Maules Creek Sub-basin and the northern Mullaley Sub-basin.

The basement structural elements also controlled the distribution of igneous intrusions and volcanism. Late Carboniferous to Early Permian eruptions followed transfer faults and flooded the developing Gunnedah Basin with basalt, while silicic volcanism appears to have developed parallel to the basin margins along longitudinal extension/detachment faults. Reactivated major transfer faults provided pathways for Jurassic and Tertiary phases of igneous intrusions and extrusions.

Recognition and mapping of basement structural elements and understanding of the basin's tectonic history highlighted the interrelationship between basin origin, tectonics and sedimentation and provided a framework for sedimentological and stratigraphic analysis and coal resource evaluation.

An hierarchical approach to genetic stratigraphic analysis has been applied to the study of the upper Black Jack Group. The analysis included definition of the geometry and distribution of genetic stratigraphic units and mapping sediment dispersion patterns within the sequence in order to develop sedimentation models and to determine the palaeogeography and tectonism expressed as basin subsidence and uplift in the source regions.

Sand body geometry of the upper Black Jack sequence emphasises the structurally controlled fluvial character, with a major axial trunk channel complex fed by easterly and westerly contributory channels.

The Hoskissons Coal and the Breeza Coal Member are regionally extensive, have tectonic and time significance and serve as genetic sequence boundaries. These seams separate genetic sequences of distinctly different depositional settings, bedding architecture, and sediment composition. The basin-wide accumulation of the Hoskissons peat represents a significant period characterised by almost total non-deposition of terrigenous clastics and marks a change in basin depositional history from predominantly deltaic and shallow marine sedimentation to fluvial and lacustrine conditions of the upper Black Jack depositional episodes. The Breeza Coal Member marks the change from the Western Depositional Episode, during which the basin fill was dominantly quartzose, derived from the Lachlan Fold Belt in the west, to the Eastern Depositional Episode when the sediment supply was from the New England Fold Belt in the east and was mainly lithic.

Four major genetic elements: the Hoskissons Peat-swamp, the Lacustrine, the Western Fluvial and the Eastern Fluvial Systems, have been recognised by their different lithology, and depositional and tectonic setting and by their palaeogeographic relationships.

The depositional systems served as mapping units with bounding surfaces for the contained genetic facies and allowed establishment and or refinement of correlations of several subregional coal seams. These seams, although not representing sequence boundaries, have time significance locally and have been used in finer subdivision within the larger genetic stratigraphic packages. Detailed lithofacies mapping of the interseam sediments provided the means to reconstruct the evolution of the upper part of the Black Jack fluvial systems, enhanced recognition of depocentres, revealed areal and stratigraphic distribution of sand bodies within the genetic units and ultimately allowed recognition of the impact of basement structures on sand distribution.

The genetically defined units provided the basis for the establishment of a new formal lithostratigraphy for the entire Permo-Triassic Gunnedah Basin sedimentary fill. In all, three groups, three subgroups, 13 formations and six members have been formally named and described in detail for the Permian section. Three formations and two members have also been formally named and described in the Triassic section. The expanded knowledge of the Gunnedah Basin sequence also allowed correlation of the stratigraphy and depositional history with those of the Sydney Basin.

The Hoskissons Coal, is the product of the Hoskissons Peat-swamp System and consists predominantly of vitrinite-poor, inertinite-rich coal with high liptinite content. Vitrinite content decreases upward in the lower section of the coal and increases upward in the upper section with a corresponding increase in the amount of disseminated and discrete mineral matter. Liptinite (mainly sporinite) content increases towards the top where alginite is also present.

The Lacustrine System displays cyclic alternation between upward-coarsening sediments of lake margin facies and organic-rich mudstone of lake basin facies.

Architectural element analysis of the Western Fluvial System indicated that the sandstone was deposited by discrete, broad, probably shallow, low sinuosity channels comparable with Models 9 and 10 of Miall (1985) for low sinuosity rivers, and the middle-upper Brownstones of Allen (1983). In vertical profile, the sequence combines features characteristic of low sinuosity rivers of the "Platt type" and the "South Saskatchewan type", or its ancient analogue - the Battery Point Formation.

Axial and tributary channel fill deposits of the Eastern Fluvial System consist mainly of volcanic-lithic conglomerate. The flood plain facies consist of carbonaceous sediments, thick stony coals and tuff .

Depositional setting had a significant influence on quality and continuity of the Hoskissons Coal. Therefore, in addition, the study included comprehensive analysis of the maceral composition of the Hoskissons Coal and applied coal facies analysis in order to understand the peat-forming environment and the factors that controlled the changes in that environment and consequently

variations in coal quality and distribution. Subsidence was the major factor that controlled development of the Hoskissons peat swamp, influx of clastic sediments and consequently, coal quality and thickness. Rate of subsidence was uneven across the basin and was structurally controlled, and in part influenced by compaction of the peat or of the underlying platform of marine sediments.

Initially, shoreline sands (of the preceding upper Watermark-lower Black Jack/Arkarula Depositional Episode), in the south, protected the peat swamps from inundation by the sea and kept the water table high enough to produce vitrinite-rich plies, low in mineral matter and sulphur, at the base of the seam. The general trend of upward decrease then increase in vitrinite content of the Hoskissons Coal indicate a gradual fall and subsequent rise in the water table which ultimately "drowned" the peat and established lacustrine conditions in the eastern part of the basin. Raw and washed coal isoash trends show a dominant fluvial influence on coal quality. Geographic zonation of the $\text{SiO}_2/\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ ratios of the coal ash corresponds closely with regional trends in the associated depositional systems. $\text{SiO}_2/\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ ratios are high in the north and south-west as a result of the influence of the quartz-rich western fluvial sediments. Tectonic stability and minor influx of clay-rich sediments from the New England Fold Belt region contributed to the low to medium $\text{SiO}_2/\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ ratios in the east.

Basement structural elements were active during sedimentation and influenced subsidence, sedimentation and peat accumulation. There is a strong relationship between the Hoskissons Coal lithotype profile, quality and thickness and basement structural elements. Organic-rich mudstone formed in rapidly subsiding areas in the centre of the trough areas where, in some places, the Hoskissons Coal has been replaced by clastic sediment. Lowest rates of subsidence on the highs and ridges produced a thin seam and exposed the coal to some degradation and partial erosion.

Sand content of the underlying platform had some influence on subsidence and consequently on coal thickness and quality. Localised compaction of the peat also contributed to subsidence in the north and central eastern areas.

Coal seams above the Hoskissons Coal, were also strongly influenced by their depositional setting. Peat accumulated in interchannel areas adjacent to the axial channel complex and principal tributaries. Location of the axial channel complex was largely structurally controlled and occupied the areas of maximum basin subsidence. Moderate subsidence rates in the north tended to entrench the axial channel complex which, as a result, isolated the peat swamps in the interchannel areas and produced fewer seams that are hard to correlate. Rapid subsidence rates in the south and south-east allowed greater lateral shift through aggradation and avulsion and favoured thick widespread peat accumulation except where the swamp has been disrupted by sediment influx from nearby channels.

The comprehensive analysis of the structure and sedimentation, complemented with a study of the peat swamp environment and coal facies analysis, greatly improved understanding of the factors which controlled peat swamp development and peat formation, coal quality and distribution, seam

thickness and splitting, and the nature of the mineral matter in the coal, and provided the basis for reliable seam correlations. All of these are important factors in the assessment of the basin's coal resources, which are estimated at 29 billion tonnes of potentially usable in situ coal. The Black Jack Group contains the vast majority of that resource, and nearly half of the total resource is contained in the Hoskissons seam.

The remaining coal resources are contained mainly in the six seams overlying the Hoskissons Coal, particularly in the Caroona area, except near the axial channel complex where quality deteriorates and in some cases the seam is split or replaced by fluvial channel deposits.

Exploration in the basin has concentrated on the Breeza, Caroona, West Gunnedah and Narrabri areas within the potentially economic zone of shallow (<500 metres), good quality coal in the east, where borehole spacing is between 4 and 8 kilometres or less and seam correlations are well established, allowing the coal resources to be calculated to Inferred status. The bulk of the resources of Hoskissons and the overlying seams is amenable to underground mining methods only.

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My direct involvement in the New South Wales Department of Mineral Resources' Gunnedah Basin exploration programmes between 1980 and 1987 and the work on the Gunnedah Basin Memoir between 1987 and 1993 have given me access to a very large data base and a unique opportunity to study a new basin at all phases of the investigation. In addition, The department provided logistic support and access to facilities such as computers, printers and a petrographic microscope to study thin sections of drill core samples. I acknowledge such support and wish to thank my direct supervisors and managers for their understanding.

Over the years, during the course of this study, I was stimulated and encouraged by many people, to all of whom I extend my gratitude. I make special mention of Professor Brian Jones, who guided my work and reviewed many of my publications; of Dr Erwin Scheibner, with whom I had lengthy discussions on many aspects of the tectonics of eastern Australia; and of my friend and colleague Dr Douglas Hamilton, with whom I had the pleasure to work in the field and the office, and whose interest in sedimentology and depositional analysis was infectious.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Therese, and my children, Margaret and Michael, who have sustained and encouraged me, generous as ever, and tolerated my incessant work on nights and weekends, and did their best to spare me from many obligations which I should have undertaken. In the final stages, Michael came to the rescue and helped in copying and collating a large part of the thesis. Foremost, Therese deserves my appreciation not only for tolerating it all, but also for typing the first draft of the thesis. I am greatly indebted to her.

DECLARATION

Except where otherwise acknowledged, this thesis, including all figures, represents the author's original research which has not previously been submitted to any institution in partial or complete fulfilment of another degree.

N. (Victor) Z. Tadros

CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Basin definition.....	3
1.2 Geography.....	10
1.3 Recent geological investigations.....	14
1.4 Recent exploration	20
1.5 Summary of geology.....	25
1.6 Fossil fuel resources	27
1.7 Data base	28
1.8 Scope and objectives.....	30
CHAPTER 2 - LITHOSTRATIGRAPHY	35
2.1 Introduction	37
2.1.1 Application of genetic stratigraphic analysis	39
2.2 Floor of the Gunnedah Basin	43
2.2.1 Boggabri Volcanics and Werrie Basalt	43
2.2.2 Lachlan Fold Belt basement	43
PERMIAN STRATIGRAPHY	45
2.3 Bellata Group	45
2.3.1 Leard Formation	45
2.3.2 Goonbri Formation	50
2.3.3 Maules Creek Formation	54
2.4 Millie Group	58
2.4.1 Porcupine Formation	58
2.4.2 Watermark Formation	61
2.5 Black Jack Group	63
A. Brothers Subgroup	67
2.5.1 Pamboola Formation	67
Melvilles Coal Member	70
2.5.2 Arkarula Formation	75
2.5.3 Brigalow Formation	77
B. Coogal Subgroup	78
2.5.4 Hoskissons Coal	78
2.5.5 Benelabri Formation	81
Caroona Coal Member	82
Howes Hill Coal Member	83
2.5.6 Clare Sandstone	85
Breeza Coal Member	87
C. Nea Subgroup	88
2.5.7 Wallala Formation	89
2.5.8 Trinkey Formation.....	92
Clift Coal Member	94
Springfield Coal Member	96
TRIASSIC STRATIGRAPHY	97
2.6 Introduction	97
2.6.1 Digby Formation	98
Bomera Conglomerate Member	101
Ulinda Sandstone Member	103
2.6.2 Napperby Formation	104
2.6.3 Deriah Formation	108
2.7 Igneous Intrusions and Extrusions	111
2.8 Correlation with the Sydney Basin	112
2.8.1 Early Permian.....	112
2.8.2 Mid-Permian	114
2.8.3 Late Permian	115
2.8.4 Triassic	116

	Page
CHAPTER 3 - TECTONIC SETTING AND BASIN EVOLUTION	119
3.1 Introduction	121
3.2 Volcanic rift stage	127
3.2.1 The mechanism of extensional/rift tectonics and application to the Gunnedah Basin	127
3.2.2 Significance of the Meandarra Gravity Ridge in the recognition of transverse basement structures	132
3.2.3 Significance of the volcanic rocks	145
3.2.4 Significance of the Hunter-Mooki Fault System	146
3.2.5 Significance of the basin fill	146
3.3 Thermal relaxation - sag stage	148
3.4 Foreland basin stage	151
CHAPTER 4 - STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS	159
4.1 Introduction	161
4.2 Basement morphology	161
4.3 Major structural elements	163
4.3.1 Longitudinal and associated structures	163
A. Ridges	163
i) Boggabri Ridge	163
ii) Rocky Glen Ridge	169
B. Shelf areas	169
C. Sub-basins	171
i) Maules Creek Sub-basin	171
ii) Mullaley Sub-basin	173
iii) Gilgandra Sub-basin	173
4.3.2 Transverse structures and troughs	174
i) Moree and Narrabri Highs; Bellata Trough	174
ii) Walla Walla Ridge; Baradine High; Bohena, Bando, Pilliga and Tooraweena Troughs	176
iii) Breeza Shelf; Bundella and Yarraman Highs	177
iv) Liverpool Structure	180
v) Murrumbidgee Trough	180
vi) Mount Coricudgy Anticline	182
4.4 Faults	184
4.4.1 Hunter-Mooki Fault System	184
4.4.2 Boggabri Fault	184
4.4.3 Rocky Glen Fault	186
4.5 Minor structures	186
CHAPTER 5 - INFLUENCE OF STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS ON THE BASIN FILL	193
5.1 Introduction	195
5.1 Early Permian	195
5.2.1 Leard - Maules Creek depositional sequence	195
5.3 Late Permian	198
5.3.1 Porcupine - lower Watermark depositional sequence	198
5.3.2 Upper Watermark - lower Black Jack depositional sequence	198
5.3.3 Upper Black Jack depositional sequence	205
5.4 Early and middle Triassic	206
5.4.1 Digby depositional sequence	206
5.4.2 Napperby depositional sequence	206
5.5 Igneous intrusions and extrusions	209
CHAPTER 6 - GENETIC STRATIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS	215
6.1 Introduction	217
6.1.1 Concepts and definitions	217
Depositional episodes	217
Seismic and sequence stratigraphy	218

	Page
Genetic stratigraphic sequence.....	220
6.2 Application of genetic stratigraphic sequences to nonmarine basins	222
6.2.1 Sedimentary processes and peat accumulation.....	223
6.2.2 Coal seams as genetic sequence boundaries.....	223
Coal seam correlation.....	227
Coal seam lithotype profiles	227
Ash profiles.....	228
Time significance of coal seams.....	228
6.2.3 Application to the Gunnedah Basin sequence.....	229
6.3 Procedure used in genetic stratigraphic analysis of the Gunnedah Basin	229
6.3.1 Quantitative facies mapping.....	231
Application of geophysical log facies.....	232
6.4 Depositional episodes of the upper Black Jack stratigraphic sequence.....	234
6.5 Geometry, depositional style and evolution of the upper Black Jack systems	238
6.5.1 Hoskissons Peat-swamp System	238
Depositional setting.....	245
6.5.2 Western Fluvial and Lacustrine Systems	248
Geometry and depositional evolution	250
Southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin.....	253
Hoskissons - Caroonia interseam interval	253
Caroonia/Hoskissons - Howes Hill interseam interval	255
Howes Hill/Hoskissons - Breeza interseam interval	257
Northern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	259
Termination of the Western (fluvial/lacustrine) Depositional Episode	259
6.5.3 Eastern Fluvial System	262
Geometry and depositional evolution	262
Breeza - Clift interseam interval	267
Clift - Springfield interseam interval	268
Springfield - Doona seam/top of Black Jack Group interval	271
Termination of the Eastern Depositional Episode	274
CHAPTER 7 - GENETIC FACIES ANALYSIS	277
7.1. Introduction	279
7.2 Lacustrine System	282
7.2.1 Component facies	282
Lake margin facies	282
Lake basin facies	289
7.2.2 Facies association	292
7.3 Western Fluvial System.....	292
7.3.1 Component facies	295
Channel fill facies	295
Channel margin facies.....	299
Floodbasin facies.....	307
7.3.2 Depositional architecture - an outcrop study of the Western Fluvial System	311
Concepts.....	311
Field methods.....	317
Lithofacies.....	319
Sandstone architecture.....	324
Depositional model.....	326
Comparison with models based on architectural element analysis	326
Comparison with models based on vertical profile analysis	328
Conclusion	330
7.4 Eastern Fluvial System.....	330
7.4.1 Component facies	330
Channel fill facies	330
Channel margin facies.....	335
Floodplain facies	335

	Page
CHAPTER 8 - DEPOSITIONAL SETTING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON COAL DISTRIBUTION AND QUALITY OF THE UPPER BLACK JACK STRATIGRAPHIC SEQUENCE	341
8.1 Introduction	343
8.1.1 Methods.....	344
Significance of coal ash.....	344
8.2 Hoskissons Coal.....	345
8.2.1 Depositional setting and its effect on coal lithotype.....	346
8.2.2 Effect of depositional setting on mineral matter content/ash yield and ash composition.....	349
Effect on ash composition.....	349
8.2.3 Effect of subsidence	356
Controls on subsidence.....	356
Compaction.....	356
Basement control.....	359
8.3 Other coal seams.....	360
8.3.1 Northern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	360
Turrawan area.....	360
Denison area	365
Benelabri area	366
Brigalow area	367
8.3.2 Southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	368
Caroona Coal Member	369
Howes Hill Coal Member	371
Breeza Coal Member.....	372
Clift Coal Member	373
Springfield Coal Member	375
Coal seams above the Springfield Coal Member	376
CHAPTER 9 - PETROGRAPHIC COMPOSITION AND ENVIRONMENT OF PEAT FORMATION OF THE HOSKISSONS COAL	379
9.1 Introduction	381
9.1.1 Macerals.....	381
9.2 Maceral composition.....	383
9.3 Compositional variations.....	388
9.3.1 Spatial variations.....	388
9.3.2 Temporal variations.....	392
Macroscopic lithotype profile	392
Petrographic profile.....	394
Comparison of petrographic and lithotype profiles.....	396
9.4 Environment of peat formation.....	396
9.4.1 Palaeoenvironmental significance of macerals	396
9.4.2 Hoskissons peat-swamp environment.....	398
9.4.3 Coal facies analysis.....	402
Fluorescence properties as environmental indicators in coal facies analysis	410
9.5 Conclusions	413
CHAPTER 10 - COAL RESOURCES OF THE GUNNEDAH BASIN.....	415
10.1 Introduction	417
10.2 Distribution, quality and utilisation potential of the main coal seams in the Mullaley Sub-basin.....	420
10.2.1 Hoskissons seam.....	420
10.2.2 Caroona seam.....	427
10.2.3 Howes Hill seam.....	428
10.2.4 Breeza seam	432
10.2.5 Clift seam	435
10.2.6 Springfield seam.....	437
10.2.7 Doona seam.....	441

	Page
10.3 Coal resources	445
10.3.1 Caroonna area	446
Open cut coal resources	448
Underground coal resources	450
Hoskissons seam	450
Melvilles seam	454
Coal seams of the upper Black Jack Group	454
10.3.2 Breeza area	456
Igneous intrusions	458
Structure	458
Open cut coal resources	460
Underground coal resources	461
Hoskissons seam	462
Melvilles seam	463
Seams of the Maules Creek Formation	466
10.3.3 West Gunnedah Area	466
Structure	468
Igneous intrusions	469
Coal resources	469
Hoskissons seam	470
Melvilles seam	475
10.3.4 Narrabri Area	478
Geology	480
Structure	482
Igneous intrusions	482
Coal resources	482
Hoskissons seam	483
Northern Area	487
Southern Area	489
Melvilles seam	490
CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	495
REFERENCES	505
APPENDICES	529
APPENDIX 1 Borehole data, Gunnedah Basin	529
APPENDIX 2 Stratigraphy and Structure Gunnedah Basin: borehole data	531
APPENDIX 3 Upper Black Jack depositional systems: borehole data	547
APPENDIX 4 Application of geophysical log facies to genetic facies analysis - upper Black Jack sequence	607
APPENDIX 5 Ash composition and silica/alumina ratios for the Hoskissons Coal	635
APPENDIX 6 Petrographic composition and environment of peat formation of the Hoskissons Coal: borehole data	639
APPENDIX 7 Coal seam analyses	657

ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURES

	Page
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	
<i>Figure 1.1</i>	Location of Permian coal-bearing basins of eastern Australia 4
<i>Figure 1.2</i>	The Sydney, Gunnedah and Bowen Basins in New South Wales 5
<i>Figure 1.3</i>	The "Main Coal Basin" of New South Wales 6
<i>Figure 1.4</i>	Definition of coalfields within the Sydney and Gunnedah Basins 7
<i>Figure 1.5</i>	The Sydney and Gunnedah Basins as defined by Bembrick et al. (1973, fig. 1) 9
<i>Figure 1.6</i>	Land use, north-eastern part of the Gunnedah Basin (Narrabri - Gunnedah - Quirindi) 11
<i>Figure 1.7</i>	Generalised stratigraphy of the "Black Jack Coal Measures" of Britten & Hanlon 1975 16
<i>Figure 1.8</i>	An early attempt to relate the depositional sequence to Permian stratigraphy 17
<i>Figure 1.9</i>	Generalised stratigraphy and depositional setting of the Permian sequence in the Gunnedah Basin, with emphasis on the Black Jack Group 17
<i>Figure 1.10</i>	Departmental and company boreholes used extensively in this study. Bores are listed alphabetically and according to map reference number 23
<i>Figure 1.11</i>	Stratigraphic sequence of the Permo-Triassic Gunnedah Basin and the Jurassic section of the overlying Surat Basin opposite page 26
<i>Figure 1.12</i>	Generalised geology of the Gunnedah Basin and the Jurassic section of the overlying Surat Basin opposite page 26
CHAPTER 2: LITHOSTRATIGRAPHY	
<i>Figure 2.1</i>	Typical vertical profiles showing stratigraphy of the upper part of the Millie Subgroup and the Brothers Subgroup superimposed on genetic facies interpretations for three boreholes located in the southern, central and northern parts of the Mullaley Sub-basin north of the Liverpool Range 42
<i>Figure 2.2</i>	Distribution of major lithological units of the floor, or basement, to the Gunnedah Basin 44
<i>Figure 2.3</i>	Reference sections of the Leard and Maules Creek Formations in DM Benelabri DDH 1 and DM Denison DDH 1 respectively 47
<i>Figure 2.4</i>	The diachronous nature of the Leard Formation and its relationship to the Maules Creek Formation 48
<i>Figure 2.5</i>	Cross-section through KCC (Kembla Coal and Coke Co.) Maules Creek area 49
<i>Figure 2.6</i>	a) East-west cross-section in the area west of Boggabri. b) Structure contours on the basal volcanic rocks and location of cross-section AB in fig. 2.6a 51
<i>Figure 2.7</i>	Type section of the Goonbri Formation 52
<i>Figure 2.8</i>	Isopachs (m) of the Maules Creek Formation in the Mullaley and Maules Creek Sub-basins 55
<i>Figure 2.9</i>	Idealised stratigraphic columns and seam nomenclature for the Maules Creek Formation in the Mullaley Sub-basin 56
<i>Figure 2.10</i>	Isopachs (m), Porcupine Formation 60
<i>Figure 2.11</i>	Isopachs (m), Black Jack Group in the Mullaley Sub-basin 65
<i>Figure 2.12</i>	Isopachs (m), Pamboola Formation 68
<i>Figure 2.13</i>	Isopachs (m), Melvilles Coal Member 71
<i>Figure 2.14</i>	Type section of the Melvilles Coal Member in DM Clift DDH 4 72
<i>Figure 2.15</i>	Lithotype (brightness profiles), Melvilles Coal Member. The cross-section runs north-west - south-east, parallel to the depositional strike. 73
<i>Figure 2.16</i>	Lithotype (brightness profiles), Melvilles Coal Member. The cross-section runs south-west - north-east, approximately parallel to the depositional dip. 74
<i>Figure 2.17</i>	Type section for the Clare Sandstone in DM Wallala DDH 1 85
<i>Figure 2.18</i>	Distribution of the Wallala Formation of the Black Jack Group in the Mullaley Sub-basin 90
<i>Figure 2.19</i>	Distribution of the Trinkey Formation of the Black Jack Group in the Mullaley Sub-basin 93
<i>Figure 2.20</i>	Type section for the Digby Formation, Bomera Conglomerate Member and Ulinda Sandstone Member in DM Wilson DDH 1 superimposed on their genetic intervals 99
<i>Figure 2.21</i>	Isopach map of the Bomera Conglomerate Member in the lower part of the Digby Formation in the Mullaley Sub-basin 102
<i>Figure 2.22</i>	Type sections for the Napperby Formation in DM Parkes DDH 3 and the Deriah Formation in DM Bellata DDH 1 showing the genetic units and depositional environments 107
<i>Figure 2.23</i>	Isopachs (m), Deriah Formation 110

CHAPTER 3 : TECTONIC SETTING AND BASIN EVOLUTION

Page

<i>Figure 3.1</i>	Structural setting of the Sydney - Bowen Basin, showing the Meandarra Gravity Ridge, the Camboon Volcanics and the New England and Lachlan Fold Belts	122
<i>Figure 3.2</i>	Structural setting of the Gunnedah Basin.....	123
<i>Figure 3.3</i>	Idealised foreland basin	124
<i>Figure 3.4</i>	Sections across the depositional axis, Bando Trough (A) Basin-fill was restricted to the most rapidly subsiding areas in the centres of the troughs and reflect subsidence of the underlying half grabens during the volcanic rift stage (B) Basin-wide sedimentation was caused by thermal sag after cessation of the volcanic rift stage (C), (D), (E) Progressive westward movement of basin axis occurred due to continued westward displacement of the foreland thrust.....	125
<i>Figure 3.5</i>	Cross-sections of the Bowen and Sydney Basins showing the asymmetric sediment pile	126
<i>Figure 3.6</i>	Generalised evolution of extensional sedimentary basins (A) Initiation of surficial extension (B) Formation of normal listric fault half-graben rift valley (C) A culmination or upwarp. (D) The sag phase represents subsidence as thermal anomalies relax	129
<i>Figure 3.7</i>	Pure shear (a) and simple shear (b) as alternative models for crustal extension and formation of rift basins (a) Pure shear; crustal thinning and upper crustal graben structures are symmetrical. (b) Simple shear extension takes place by separation of the upper crustal plate from the lower crustal plate along a shallowly dipping detachment surface and produces asymmetrical morphotectonic features	130
<i>Figure 3.8</i>	Crustal extension model applied to the Gunnedah Basin	131
<i>Figure 3.9</i>	(A) Location of the 1989 BMR deep seismic reflection line BMR89.B01 (B) Geological interpretation of part of deep seismic reflection line BMR90.B01 showing major east-dipping detachment (C) Geological interpretation of deep seismic reflection line BMR89.B01 showing details of imbricate thrust fan in the central Yarrabee zone.....	130
<i>Figure 3.10</i>	The Sydney and Gunnedah Basins showing structural domains bounded by north-easterly trends and the effects along the trends on continuous structures	134
<i>Figure 3.11</i>	Total-field Bouguer gravity anomaly map showing the Meandarra Gravity Ridge in the eastern part of the Gunnedah Basin	135
<i>Figure 3.12</i>	Profile across southern end of Meandarra Gravity Ridge corrected for regional gradient and effect of Sydney Basin sediments and interpreted cross-section	136
<i>Figure 3.13</i>	Structure contours (m asl) on the top of the basal volcanic units superimposed on the total-field Bouguer gravity anomaly map of the eastern part of the Gunnedah Basin	138
<i>Figure 3.14</i>	Location of the deep seismic reflection profile BMR91.G01 across the Gunnedah Basin and western New England Orogen	139
<i>Figure 3.15</i>	Portion of the unmigrated deep seismic section BMR91.G01 in the Mullaley Sub-basin showing thick, well-layered succession forming the volcanic pile. The interpreted faulted horizon is the top of the volcanic pile (base of the Gunnedah Basin sedimentary pile). The interpreted thrust fault can be traced for at least 4 km through the Gunnedah Basin succession and the underlying basal volcanic pile and supports the author's analysis (Tadros 1988c) which suggested a thrust fault along the eastern flank of the Rocky Glen Ridge.	140
<i>Figure 3.16</i>	A larger portion of the unmigrated deep seismic section BMR91.G01 showing the western margin of the Mullaley Sub-basin thinning onto the Rocky Glen Ridge and the thrust fault shown in figure 3.15 with west-directed thrusting of the upper (eastern) plate.	140
<i>Figure 3.17</i>	Structure contours (m asl) on the top of the basal volcanic units superimposed on the total-field Bouguer gravity anomaly map of the eastern part of the Gunnedah Basin, with correction for offset and rotation discussed in the text	140
<i>Figure 3.18</i>	Residual Bouguer gravity anomalies and the Meandarra Gravity Ridge, Sydney - Bowen Basin	143
<i>Figure 3.19</i>	Traces of major transfer faults, Sydney - Bowen Basin.....	144
<i>Figure 3.20</i>	Schematic model for the Early Permian inception of the Bowen Basin north of 26°S latitude by back-arc extension. Basin structures such as the Denison Trough, Comet Ridge, and Camboon Volcanic Arc are shown in their present relative positions.....	145

	Page
<i>Figure 3.21</i> Isopachs (m) of Early Permian sediments (Leard, Goonbri and Maules Creek Formations), Gunnedah Basin.....	147
<i>Figure 3.22</i> Isopachs (m) of the marine Porcupine and Watermark Formations, Gunnedah Basin.....	150
<i>Figure 3.23</i> Structural relationship between the top of the Hoskissons Coal and the base of the Digby Formation	153
<i>Figure 3.24</i> Isopachs (m) of sediment wedge between the top of the Hoskissons Coal and the base of the Digby Formation	154
<i>Figure 3.25</i> An east - west section across the Narrabri area. Gamma and bulk density logs provide a strong evidence for the angular unconformity between the Hoskissons Coal and the overlying Triassic Digby Formation	155
<i>Figure 3.26</i> Detailed lithotype and ash profiles of the Hoskissons Coal in the three boreholes shown in figure 3.25.....	156
<i>Figure 3.27</i> Regional setting and Permo-Triassic unconformity.....	157
 CHAPTER 4 : STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS	
<i>Figure 4.1</i> Structure contours (m asl) on the top of the basal volcanic rocks of the Gunnedah Basin, showing longitudinal sub-basins and prominent highs and ridges	162
<i>Figure 4.2</i> Structural subdivision of the Gunnedah Basin. Major residual Bouguer gravity lineaments of Scheibner (1993a) are also shown.....	164
<i>Figure 4.3</i> Outcrop of the Boggabri Ridge	165
<i>Figure 4.4</i> Boggabri Ridge outcrop. Arrows indicate principal directions of fracture systems	166
<i>Figure 4.5</i> Detailed map of fracture systems on the Boggabri Ridge outcrop north of Boggabri	167
<i>Figure 4.6</i> a) Total-field Bouguer gravity anomalies and major structural elements in the western Gunnedah Basin	170
<i>Figure 4.6</i> b) East - west cross sections across the Rocky Glen Ridge.....	171
<i>Figure 4.7</i> East and West Bellata Faults interpreted on seismic line 1, Bellata Seismic Survey	172
<i>Figure 4.8</i> North - south-east cross-section, Gunnedah Basin. A. Datum base of Black Jack Group (top of marine sequence). B. Datum base of Triassic. C. Present elevation.	175
<i>Figure 4.9</i> Isopachs (m) of the Digby Formation, Gunnedah Basin. Shading highlights two main depocentres	178
<i>Figure 4.10</i> Isopachs (m) of the Napperby and Deriah Formations, Gunnedah Basin. Shading highlights depocentres.....	179
<i>Figure 4.11</i> Structure contours (m asl) on the base of the Triassic sequence, Gunnedah Basin, based on borehole data and interpretation of seismic profiles	181
<i>Figure 4.12</i> North-west - south-east section across the Mount Coricudgy Anticline	183
<i>Figure 4.13</i> (A) Portion of the unmigrated deep seismic section BMR.G01 across the Maules Creek Sub-basin and the western part of the Tamworth Belt, showing the succession thickening towards the east and containing local structural complications due to thrust faulting. (B) Line diagram of the western part of the deep seismic reflection profile BMR91.G01 across the Gunnedah Basin and the western part of the New England Orogen, showing the interpreted distribution of the Early Permian volcanic pile and the Lachlan Orogen beneath the Gunnedah Basin	185
<i>Figure 4.14</i> Minor structures, Mullaley Sub-basin	187
<i>Figure 4.15</i> Structure contours (m asl) on the base of the Hoskissons Coal, Breeza area, showing the influence of local folds on regional structure	188
<i>Figure 4.16</i> Cross-section, Breeza area	188
<i>Figure 4.17</i> (A) North-south seismic line over the Wilga Park gas field (B) North-south seismic line over the Wilga Park structure showing a volcanic plug of probable Tertiary age and associated extensional faulting	190
 CHAPTER 5 : INFLUENCE OF STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS ON THE BASIN FILL	
<i>Figure 5.1</i> Schematic depositional setting for the Maules Creek Formation in the Mullaley Sub-basin.....	197
<i>Figure 5.2</i> Isopachs (m), Porcupine - Lower Watermark Marine-shelf System	199
<i>Figure 5.3</i> Isopachs (m), lower Porcupine Formation (total Porcupine Formation minus transition facies of Jian 1991)	200

	Page
<i>Figure 5.4</i> Isopachs (m), prodelta facies, Upper Watermark - Lower Black Jack Delta Systems	202
<i>Figure 5.5</i> Net sandstone (m), lower delta plain facies, Upper Watermark - Lower Black Jack Delta Systems	203
<i>Figure 5.6</i> Net sandstone (m), Arkarula Shallow-marine System (includes the Western Bed-load Fluvial System; of Hamilton 1985)	204
<i>Figure 5.7</i> Net conglomerate (m), Conglomerate Interval of the Digby Formation	207
<i>Figure 5.8</i> Net sandstone (m), Sandy Interval of the Digby Formation	208
<i>Figure 5.9</i> Isopachs (m), Napperby Formation (Intervals A, B and C of Jian 1991 and Jian and Ward 1993)	210
<i>Figure 5.10</i> Percentage sandstone, Napperby Formation (Intervals A, B and C of Jian 1991 and Jian and Ward 1993)	211
<i>Figure 5.11</i> Percentage sandstone, Napperby Formation (Interval B of of Jian 1991)	212
<i>Figure 5.12</i> Tertiary and Jurassic volcanic complexes of the Gunnedah Basin showing broad north east	213

CHAPTER 6 : GENETIC STRATIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

<i>Figure 6.1</i>	(A) Coal seams are conceptually equivalent to the hiatal surfaces of Frazier (1974). Localised or subregional coals can potentially cap the small-scale facies sequences and depositional events, while regionally extensive coals can bound the depositional episodes (B) Temporal and spatial relationships of a depositional episode and the phases of its component depositional events (C) Hiatal surfaces bound the depositional episode, which in turn encompasses one major internal hiatal surface	219
<i>Figure 6.2</i>	An active depositional system consists of a complex of genetically related environments. The sedimentary record of these environments, preserved as genetic facies, constitutes a three-dimensional stratigraphic depositional system	220
<i>Figure 6.3</i>	Schematic illustrations of examples, at several scales, of processes capable of shutting off sediment supply and providing opportunity for peat accumulation (A) Disruption of sediment supply at a basin-wide scale. Tectonic movement has tilted the thrust belt causing stream capture and shedding of sediment to the north-east into an interthrust belt basin. (B) Sediment bypass at a subregional scale where the axial channel complex occupied the eastern portion of the basin and peat accumulated uninterrupted in the west. (C) Localised peat accumulation in a cut-off meander loop of a moderately sinuous mixed-load fluvial system.	224
<i>Figure 6.4. a)</i>	Drainage diversion tectonic model proposed by Belt (1993) for the origin of peat with large lateral extent in the Appalachian Basin	
	b) Model for the origin of a coarse clastic depositional interval in the Appalachian Basin	226
<i>Figure 6.5</i>	Geophysical log facies in the Gunnedah Basin. Letters a-p distinguish differences in log patterns for aggradational, progradational and mixed log facies.	233
<i>Figure 6.6</i>	East - West cross-section west of Gunnedah showing gamma and neutron log response of the Gunnedah Basin rocks, depositional systems and the new stratigraphy.	enclosure.in back pocket
<i>Figure 6.7</i>	West - east cross-section west of Breeza showing gamma and neutron log response of the Gunnedah Basin rocks, depositional systems and the new stratigraphy.	enclosure.in back pocket
<i>Figure 6.8</i>	North - south cross-section in the western part of the Mullaley Sub-basin showing gamma and neutron log response of the Gunnedah Basin rocks, depositional systems and the new stratigraphy.	enclosure.in back pocket
<i>Figure 6.9</i>	North - southeast cross-section west of Gunnedah showing gamma and neutron log response of the Gunnedah Basin rocks, depositional systems and the new stratigraphy.	enclosure.in back pocket
<i>Figure 6.10</i>	Borehole and cross section locations for figures (enclosures) showing gamma and neutron log response of the rocks and the depositional systems in the Gunnedah Basin.	234
<i>Figure 6.11</i>	Depositional systems, upper Black Jack Group.	235
<i>Figure 6.12</i>	Cross-section, upper Black Jack depositional systems	opposite page 236
<i>Figure 6.13</i>	Net sandstone (m), Western Bed-load Fluvial System of Hamilton (1985).	237
<i>Figure 6.14</i>	Isopachs (m), upper Black Jack depositional systems.	239
<i>Figure 6.15</i>	Net sandstone (m), upper Black Jack depositional systems.	240

	Page
<i>Figure 6.16</i> Percentage sandstone, upper Black Jack depositional systems	241
<i>Figure 6.17</i> Schematic three-dimensional palaeogeographic reconstructions of major phases in the evolution of the upper Black Jack depositional episodes (C-F) and the precursor environments which formed the late phases of the Upper Watermark - Lower Black Jack Depositional Episode (A & B).	242
A. Arkarula Shallow marine System	
B. Western Bed-load Fluvial System	
C. Hoskissons peat-swamp system	242
D. Lacustrine and Western Fluvial Systems	
E. Eastern Fluvial System, channel fill/bed-load facies	
F. Eastern Fluvial System, flood plain facies	243
<i>Figure 6.18</i> Isopachs (m), Hoskissons Coal.	244
<i>Figure 6.19</i> Lithotype and ash profiles, Hoskissons Coal	246
<i>Figure 6.20</i> Percentage sandstone, Lacustrine System, upper Black Jack Group.	249
<i>Figure 6.21</i> Isopachs (m), Western Fluvial System, upper Black Jack Group	251
<i>Figure 6.22</i> Percentage sandstone, Western Fluvial System and Lacustrine System	252
<i>Figure 6.23</i> Isopachs (m), Hoskissons - Carroona interseam interval.	253
<i>Figure 6.24</i> Percentage sandstone, Hoskissons - Carroona interseam interval.	254
<i>Figure 6.25</i> Net sandstone, Hoskissons - Carroona interseam interval	254
<i>Figure 6.26</i> Isopachs (m), Carroona (and/or Hoskissons) - Howes Hill interseam interval	255
<i>Figure 6.27</i> Percentage sandstone, Carroona (and/or Hoskissons) - Howes Hill interseam interval	256
<i>Figure 6.28</i> Net sandstone, Carroona (and/or Hoskissons) - Howes Hill interseam interval.	256
<i>Figure 6.29</i> Isopachs (m), Howes Hill (and/or Hoskissons) - Breeza interseam interval.	257
<i>Figure 6.30</i> Percentage sandstone, Howes Hill (and/or Hoskissons) - Breeza interseam interval.	258
<i>Figure 6.31</i> Net sandstone (m), Howes Hill (and/or Hoskissons) - Breeza interseam interval.	258
<i>Figure 6.32</i> Isopachs (m), upper part of the Western Fluvial System (interval between the Howes Hill and Breeza Coal Members and their equivalents) showing incision due to erosion by the south-westerly flowing channels of the Eastern Fluvial System.....	261
<i>Figure 6.33</i> Net sandstone (m), Eastern Fluvial System, upper Black Jack Group.	263
<i>Figure 6.34</i> Percentage sandstone (m), Eastern Fluvial System, upper Black Jack Group.....	264
<i>Figure 6.35</i> Percentage Conglomerate (m), Eastern Fluvial System, upper Black Jack Group.	265
<i>Figure 6.36</i> Isopachs(m), Eastern Fluvial System, upper Black Jack Group.	266
<i>Figure 6.37</i> Percentage sandstone, Breeza - Clift interseam interval.	267
<i>Figure 6.38</i> Net sandstone, Breeza - Clift interseam interval.	268
<i>Figure 6.39</i> Isopachs (m), Breeza - Clift interseam interval	269
<i>Figure 6.40</i> Percentage sandstone, Clift-Springfield interseam interval.	269
<i>Figure 6.41</i> Net sandstone, Clift - Springfield interseam interval.....	270
<i>Figure 6.42</i> Isopachs (m), Clift - Springfield interseam interval.	270
<i>Figure 6.43</i> Percentage sandstone, Springfield - Doona interseam interval.	271
<i>Figure 6.44</i> Net sandstone (m), Springfield - Doona interseam interval.....	272
<i>Figure 6.45</i> Isopachs (m), Springfield - Doona interseam interval.	272
<i>Figure 6.46</i> Percentage sandstone, Springfield Coal Member - top of Black Jack Group.	273
<i>Figure 6.47</i> Net sandstone, Springfield Coal Member - top of Black Jack Group	273
<i>Figure 6.48</i> Isopachs (m), Springfield Coal Member - top of Black Jack Group	274

CHAPTER 7 : GENETIC FACIES ANALYSIS

<i>Figure 7.1</i> Geomorphic and sedimentary characteristics of bed-load, mixed-load and suspended-load channel segments and their deposit.....	281
<i>Figure 7.2</i> Geophysical log pattern of a cyclic lacustrine sequence, upper Black Jack Group in DME Narrabri DDH 19	283
<i>Figure 7.3</i> Idealised vertical section showing sedimentary facies of the lacustrine sequence, upper Black Jack Group	284
<i>Figure 7.4</i> Geophysical log pattern of the lake sequence in DM Narrabri DDH 41	288
<i>Figure 7.5</i> Geophysical log pattern of the lake basin facies of the Lacustrine System, upper Black Jack Group in DME Narrabri DDH 33	290

<i>Figure 7.6</i>	Geophysical log pattern of the channel fills of the Western Fluvial System is sharply defined by low gamma and high neutron log responses, upper Black Jack Group in DME Narrabri DDH 17	294
<i>Figure 7.7</i>	Geophysical log pattern of the channel fill and channel margin facies of the Western Fluvial System, upper Black Jack Group in DME Narrabri DDH 5	298
<i>Figure 7.8</i>	Vertical profile, DM Tinkrameanah DDH 1	300
<i>Figure 7.9</i>	Vertical profile analysis of westerly-derived coarse-grained quartz-rich sandstone interpreted as channel fill of the Western Fluvial System in DM Terrawinda DDH 1	302
<i>Figure 7.10</i>	Vertical profile for the sequence shown in photo 7.10, DM Gunnadilly DDH 1	304
<i>Figure 7.11</i>	The major architectural elements	313
<i>Figure 7.12</i>	The hierarchy of elements	314
<i>Figure 7.13</i>	Allen's (1983) summary of the features of the sheet sandstones present in the Brownstones in the forest of Dean, southern Welsh Borders	315
<i>Figure 7.14</i>	Geometry of individual active channels and their channel fill complex	315
<i>Figure 7.15</i>	Topographic map showing location of the outcrop of the Clare Sandstone on the north-eastern side of Mount Watermark	318
<i>Figure 7.16</i>	Photomosaic interpretations detailed on photos 7.22 - 7.25, Mount Watermark	320
<i>Figure 7.17</i>	Model 9 of Miall (1985, fig. 15): low sinuosity river with linguoid bars and "Platte-type macroforms" (Crowley 1983)	327
<i>Figure 7.18</i>	Model 10 of Miall (1985, fig. 16): relatively deep, low-sinuosity river with foreset macroforms (sand flats or shoals) and isolated linguoid and transverse bars	327
<i>Figure 7.19</i>	Allan's (1983, fig. 19) model for the middle-upper Brownstones of the Ross-on-Wye area, Forest of Dean, South Welsh Borders	328
<i>Figure 7.20</i>	Vertical profile models of the (A) Platt type and (B) South Saskatchewan type and (C) Battery Point summary sequence	329
<i>Figure 7.21</i>	Vertical profile of floodplain, channel margin facies of the New England derived mixed-load and alluvial fan systems in DM Gunnadilly DDH 1	333
<i>Figure 7.22</i>	Geophysical log pattern, Eastern fluvial sequence in DM Narrabri DDH 1, upper Black Jack Group	334
<i>Figure 7.23</i>	A vertical profile of axial and tributary channel facies and overlying alluvial fan deposits of the New England derived Eastern Fluvial System in DM Wallala DDH	336
<i>Figure 7.24</i>	Percentage tuff, tuffaceous sediments and pyroclastic detritus, upper Black Jack Group	340

CHAPTER 8 : DEPOSITIONAL SETTING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON COAL DISTRIBUTION AND QUALITY OF THE UPPER BLACK JACK DEPOSITIONAL SEQUENCE

<i>Figure 8.1</i>	Typical lithotype and ash profiles, Hoskissons Coal	347
<i>Figure 8.2</i>	Raw coal isoash (%), Hoskissons Coal	350
<i>Figure 8.3</i>	Composition of ash in the 1.6 RD float fraction for the Hoskissons Coal	351
<i>Figure 8.4</i>	Lateral variation of ash composition in the Hoskissons Coal as shown by the SiO ₂ /Al ₂ O ₃ mole ratio for the 1.6 RD float fraction	352
<i>Figure 8.5</i>	Distribution of stone layers in the Hoskissons Coal	353
<i>Figure 8.6</i>	Isoash (%) of the 1.60 RD float fraction (approximately equivalent to the amount of disseminated mineral matter), Hoskissons Coal	354
<i>Figure 8.7</i>	Overlap between the raw coal isoash (%) of the Hoskissons Coal and percentage sandstone of the Arkarula Shallow-marine System	358
<i>Figure 8.8</i>	Hoskissons Coal lithotype and ash profiles, north - south (-east) section showing influence of basement structure on coal development	361
<i>Figure 8.9</i>	Isopachs (m), upper Black Jack Group, and the traces of the axial channel complex as defined by the isopach and net and percentage sandstone maps	362
<i>Figure 8.10</i>	Peat-swamp areas of the upper Black Jack Group	363
<i>Figure 8.11</i>	Brightness profiles of seams in the Turrawan area	364
<i>Figure 8.12</i>	Brightness profiles of seams in the Denison area	365
<i>Figure 8.13</i>	Brightness profiles of seams in the Benelabri area	366
<i>Figure 8.14</i>	Brightness profiles of seams in the Brigalow area	367
<i>Figure 8.15</i>	East - west cross-section in the southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin, showing the Hoskissons Coal and the upper part of the Black Jack Group	368
<i>Figure 8.16</i>	Caroona Coal Member, lithotype profile, cross-section	369

<i>Figure 8.17</i>	Relationship between the axial channel complex of the Western Fluvial System and quality of the Carroona Coal Member	370
<i>Figure 8.18</i>	Howes Hill Coal Member, lithotype profile, cross-section.....	371
<i>Figure 8.19</i>	Breeza Coal Member, lithotype profile, cross-section.....	373
<i>Figure 8.20</i>	Clift Coal Member, lithotype profile, cross-section.....	374
<i>Figure 8.21</i>	Springfield Coal Member, lithotype profile, cross-section.....	375
<i>Figure 8.22</i>	Doona seam, lithotype profile, cross-section.....	377

CHAPTER 9 PETROGRAPHIC COMPOSITION AND ENVIRONMENT OF PEAT FORMATION OF THE HOSKISSONS COAL

<i>Figure 9.1</i>	Proportions of various maceral groups in the Hoskissons Coal.....	383
<i>Figure 9.2</i>	Maceral composition diagram for the Hoskissons Coal showing the ratio of non-oxidised (vitrinite + liptinite) to oxidised (inertinite) macerals, and semifusinite ratio of structured inertinite (semifusinite + fusinite) to detrital inertinite (inertodetrinite + macrinite).....	387
<i>Figure 9.3</i>	Lateral variations in vitrinite content of the Hoskissons Coal.....	389
<i>Figure 9.4</i>	Lateral variations in inertinite content of the Hoskissons Coal.....	390
<i>Figure 9.5</i>	Lateral variations in liptinite (exinite) content of the Hoskissons Coal.....	391
<i>Figure 9.6</i>	Two Hoskissons Coal lithotype profiles illustrating a typical profile and a composite (idealised) A-G profile.....	393
<i>Figure 9.7</i>	Petrographic profile (mmf) of sections of the Hoskissons Coal from boreholes in the northern and southern parts of the Gunnedah Basin.....	394
<i>Figure 9.8</i>	Liptinite content, Hoskissons Coal.....	395
<i>Figure 9.9</i>	Correlation between tissue preservation and gelification indices of some Sydney Basin coal seams. Selected seams from the Sydney and Gunnedah Basins are also shown	404
<i>Figure 9.10</i>	Coal facies diagram, Hoskissons Coal (total seam section) from 41 bore hole intersections in the Mullaley Sub-Basin, north of the Liverpool Range.....	405
<i>Figure 9.11</i>	Coal facies diagram showing a comparison of GI/TPI plots for samples taken by Diessel (1986) from the Hoskissons seam in the Gunnedah Colliery where mining is limited to the lower seam section and samples taken from 4 full seam intersections (total Hoskissons Coal) in neighbouring boreholes.....	406
<i>Figure 9.12</i>	Coal facies diagrams, Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 4.....	407
<i>Figure 9.13</i>	Coal facies diagrams, Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 9.....	407
<i>Figure 9.14</i>	Coal facies diagrams, Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 11.....	408
<i>Figure 9.15</i>	Coal facies diagrams, Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 13.....	408
<i>Figure 9.16</i>	Coal facies diagrams, Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 30.....	409
<i>Figure 9.17</i>	Coal facies diagrams, Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 39.....	409
<i>Figure 9.18</i>	Coal facies diagrams, Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 40.....	410
<i>Figure 9.19</i>	Vertical distribution of various coal properties in five subsections in the Hoskissons Coal A. Mean fluorescence intensities B. Mean random reflectance C. Maceral group composition of organic matter D. Coal facies.....	412

CHAPTER 10 : COAL RESOURCES OF THE GUNNEDAH BASIN

<i>Figure 10.1</i>	Mullaley and Maules Creek Sub-basins showing coal mines, coal project areas and the Breeza, Carroona, West Gunnedah and Narrabri coal resource areas	419
<i>Figure 10.2</i>	Isopachs (m), potential working section of the Hoskissons seam	421
<i>Figure 10.3</i>	Hoskissons Coal lithotype (brightness) and ash profiles, north-south (- east) section	opposite page 422
<i>Figure 10.4</i>	Sulphur (%), Hoskissons seam	423
<i>Figure 10.5</i>	Raw coal isoash (%), Hoskissons seam	424
<i>Figure 10.6</i>	Isoash (%) at CF 1.60 RD, potential working section of the Hoskissons seam	425
<i>Figure 10.7</i>	Isoyield (%) at CF 1.60 RD, potential working section of the Hoskissons seam	426
<i>Figure 10.8</i>	Isopachs (m), Carroona seam	427
<i>Figure 10.9</i>	Typical lithotype and ash profiles, Carroona seam.....	opposite page 428
<i>Figure 10.10</i>	Raw coal isoash (%), Carroona seam	428
<i>Figure 10.11</i>	Isopachs (m), potential working section of the Carroona seam	429

	Page
<i>Figure 10.12</i> Raw coal isoash (%), potential working section of the Caroonna seam	429
<i>Figure 10.13</i> Isopachs (m), Howes Hill seam	430
<i>Figure 10.14</i> Typical lithotype and ash profiles, Howes Hill seam	opposite page 428
<i>Figure 10.15</i> Raw coal isoash (%), Howes Hill seam	431
<i>Figure 10.16</i> Isopachs (m), potential working section of the Howes Hill seam	431
<i>Figure 10.17</i> Raw coal isoash (%), potential working section of the Howes Hill seam	432
<i>Figure 10.18</i> Isopachs (m), Breeza seam	433
<i>Figure 10.19</i> Raw coal isoash (%), Breeza seam	433
<i>Figure 10.20</i> Typical lithotype and ash profiles, Breeza seam	opposite page 434
<i>Figure 10.21</i> Isopachs (m), potential working section of the Breeza seam	434
<i>Figure 10.22</i> Raw coal isoash (%), potential working section of the Breeza seam	434
<i>Figure 10.23</i> Isopachs (m), Clift seam	435
<i>Figure 10.24</i> Typical lithotype and ash profiles, Clift seam	opposite page 436
<i>Figure 10.25</i> Raw coal isoash (%), Clift seam	436
<i>Figure 10.26</i> Isopachs (m), potential working section of the Clift seam	436
<i>Figure 10.27</i> Raw coal isoash (%), potential working section of the Clift seam	437
<i>Figure 10.28</i> Isopachs (m), Springfield seam	438
<i>Figure 10.29</i> Raw coal isoash (%), Springfield seam	439
<i>Figure 10.30</i> Typical lithotype and ash profiles, Springfield seam	opposite page 440
<i>Figure 10.31</i> Isopachs (m), potential lower working section of the Springfield seam	439
<i>Figure 10.32</i> Raw coal isoash (%), potential lower working section of the Springfield seam	440
<i>Figure 10.33</i> Isopachs (m), potential upper working section of the Springfield seam	440
<i>Figure 10.34</i> Raw coal isoash (%), potential upper working section of the Springfield seam	441
<i>Figure 10.35</i> Isopachs (m), Doona seam	opposite page 442
<i>Figure 10.36</i> Raw coal isoash (%), Doona seam	442
<i>Figure 10.37</i> Typical lithotype and ash profiles, Doona seam	442
<i>Figure 10.38</i> Isopachs (m), potential working section of the Doona seam	443
<i>Figure 10.39</i> Raw coal isoash (%), potential working section of the Doona seam	443
<i>Figure 10.40</i> Borehole locations and general geology of the Caroonna area	447
<i>Figure 10.41</i> Isopachs (m) of alluvial cover, Caroonna area	449
<i>Figure 10.42</i> Structure contours (m asl) on the base of the Hoskissons seam, Caroonna area	451
<i>Figure 10.43</i> Isopachs (m) for the Hoskissons seam, Caroonna area	452
<i>Figure 10.44</i> Raw coal isoash (%) for the 4 m basal section of the Hoskissons seam, Caroonna area	453
<i>Figure 10.45</i> Isopachs (m) for the Melvilles seam, Caroonna area	455
<i>Figure 10.46</i> Borehole locations and general geology of the Breeza area	457
<i>Figure 10.47</i> Structure contours (m asl) on the base of the Hoskissons seam, Breeza area	459
<i>Figure 10.48</i> Structure contours (m asl) on the base of the Melvilles seam, Breeza area	459
<i>Figure 10.49</i> Isopachs (m) for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Breeza area	462
<i>Figure 10.50</i> Raw coal isoash (%) for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Breeza area	463
<i>Figure 10.51</i> Composite isopachs (m) and isoash (%) for the Hoskissons seam, Breeza area	464
<i>Figure 10.52</i> Isopachs (m) for the Melvilles seam, Breeza area	464
<i>Figure 10.53</i> Raw coal isoash (%) for the Melvilles seam, Breeza area	465
<i>Figure 10.54</i> Composite isopachs (m) and isoash (%) for the Melvilles seam, Breeza area	466
<i>Figure 10.55</i> Borehole locations and general geology of the West Gunnedah area	467
<i>Figure 10.56</i> Isopachs (m) for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, West Gunnedah area	471
<i>Figure 10.57</i> Raw coal isoash (%) for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, West Gunnedah area	472
<i>Figure 10.58</i> Composite isopachs (m) and isoash (%) for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, West Gunnedah area	474
<i>Figure 10.59</i> Isopachs (m) for the Melvilles seam, West Gunnedah area	476
<i>Figure 10.60</i> Raw coal isoash (%) for the Melvilles seam, West Gunnedah area	477
<i>Figure 10.61</i> Composite isopachs (m) and isoash (%) for the potential working section of the Melvilles seam, West Gunnedah area	479
<i>Figure 10.62</i> Land use, Narrabri area	480
<i>Figure 10.63</i> Borehole locations and general geology of the Narrabri area	481
<i>Figure 10.64</i> Structure contours (m asl) on the base of the Hoskissons seam, Narrabri area	483
<i>Figure 10.65</i> Isopachs (m) for the Hoskissons seam (shows lower split within split zone), Narrabri area	483

	Page
<i>Figure 10.66</i> Isopachs (m) for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Narrabri area	485
<i>Figure 10.67</i> Raw coal isoash (%) for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Narrabri area	487
<i>Figure 10.68</i> Composite isoash (%) and isopachs (m) for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Narrabri area	487
<i>Figure 10.69</i> Composite isoash (%) and isoyield (%) CFI.90 RD for the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Narrabri area	488
<i>Figure 10.70</i> Typical lithotype and ash profiles, Melvilles seam, Narrabri area	491
<i>Figure 10.71</i> Isopachs (m) for the potential working section of the Melvilles seam, Narrabri area	492
<i>Figure 10.72</i> Raw coal isoash (%) for the potential working section of the Melvilles seam, Narrabri area	492

PHOTOS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

<i>Photo 1.1a</i> Beloungery Spire (trachite) on the Grand High Tops in the central area of the Warrumbungle Volcanic Complex	12
<i>Photo 1.1b</i> Crater Bluff (peralkaline trachite) on the Grand High Tops in the central area of the Warrumbungle Volcanic Complex	12
<i>Photo 1.1c</i> The Breadknife (peralkaline trachite) dyke on the Grand High Tops in the central area of the Warrumbungle Volcanic Complex	12
<i>Photo 1.2a</i> Extrusive domes of the Jurassic Garrawilla Volcanics in the Mullaley - Nombi area	13
<i>Photo 1.2b</i> Close-up of an extrusive dome of the Garrawilla Volcanics	13

CHAPTER 4: STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

<i>Photo 4.1.</i> Boggabri Volcanics outcrop near the top of Gins Leap, approx 4.5 km north of Boggabri, showing strong north-east-trending fractures across flow banding. Photograph taken looking east-north-east	168
<i>Photo 4.2.</i> Gins Leap, an outcrop of Boggabri Volcanics. Photo taken looking north-westerly	168

CHAPTER 7: GENETIC FACIES ANALYSIS

<i>Photo 7.1.</i> Lacustrine sequence in DM Goran DDH 2	285
<i>Photo 7.2.</i> Typical lake sequence in DM Narrabri DDH 41, showing cyclic alternation between marginal and lake basin sediments	286
<i>Photo 7.3</i> X-radiograph of the lake basin in DME Narrabri DDH 39	291
<i>Photo 7.4</i> A sequence from DM Millie DDH 1 consisting of the Hoskissons Coal at the base, lacustrine sediments in the middle, and bed-load sediments of the main axial channel complex of the Western Fluvial System at the top	293
<i>Photo 7.5</i> Typical sequence of the Western Fluvial System, DM Tinkrameanah DDH 1	295
<i>Photo 7.6</i> Planar tabular crossbedding in coarse- to very coarse-grained quartz-rich sandstone of the Western Fluvial System in DM Wallala DDH 3 and DM Gunnadilly DDH 1	296
<i>Photo 7.7</i> Close-up of a cliff-forming sandstone outcrop of the Western Fluvial System near top of Mount Watermark some 8 km west of Breeza, showing details of sedimentary structures of a bed-load channel facies	296
<i>Photo 7.8</i> Small-scale trough cross-stratification, interpreted as bar-top similar to those formed on the tops of sand flats in the South Saskatchewan River	
a) photograph of a slabbed core from DM Tinkrameanah DDH 1	297
b) map overlay of the slabbed core in (a) to show that small scale trough and tabular cross-stratification can be differentiated in slim core	overlay 297
<i>Photo 7.9</i> Westerly-derived coarse-grained quartz-rich sandstone interpreted as channel fill of the Western Fluvial System in DM Terrawinda DDH 1	302
<i>Photo 7.10</i> A thick sequence of westerly-derived, coarse- to medium-grained quartz-rich sandstone interpreted as channel fills of the main axial channel of the Western Fluvial System in DM Gunnadilly DDH 1	303
<i>Photo 7.11</i> (a) Sequence in DM Wallala DDH 3 showing gradual change from westerly sourced quartz-rich sandstone upwards to volcanic-lithic detritus sourced from the east	305
(b) An enlargement of the upper part of the three core lengths in photo 7.11a	305

	Page
<i>Photo 7.12</i>	Close-up of part of photo 7.11 showing intermixed westerly and easterly sourced lithologies 305
<i>Photo 7.13</i>	Channel, channel margin, floodbasin sequence in DME Narrabri DDH 5 306
<i>Photo 7.14</i>	Broadly upward-fining sequence in DME Narrabri DDH 1 interpreted as channel - channel margin deposit of the Western Fluvial System in the northern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin..... 306
<i>Photos 7.15</i>	Soft sediment deformation structures in channel margin deposits produced by gravity slumping 307
<i>Photo 7.16</i>	Soft sediment deformation structures in channel margin deposits produced by overloading..... 307
<i>Photo 7.17</i>	Crevasse splay sequences in DM Parsons Hill DDH 1 308
<i>Photo 7.18</i>	Close-up of a thin crevasse splay in DM Parsons Hill DDH 1 showing subtle upward-coarsening sandstone indicating progradation, followed by upward-fining sequence with laminae of macerated organic material indicating abandonment 309
<i>Photo 7.19</i>	Finely macerated organic material preserved on bedding and cross-bedding planes in DM Gunnadilly DDH 1 309
<i>Photo 7.20</i>	Finely macerated organic material dispersed near the top of a thick crevasse splay in DM Parsons Hill DDH 1 309
<i>Photo 7.21</i>	Sandy floodbasin sequence in DM Gunnadilly DDH 1 proximal to main axial channel underlain by channel margin and channel fill deposits..... 310
<i>Photo 7.22</i>	Mount Watermark west of Breeza..... 317
<i>Photo 7.23</i>	The south-eastern part of the cliff-forming outcrop of the Clare Sandstone (the stratigraphic unit forming the Western Fluvial System), near the top of Mount Watermark west of Breeza, and a plastic overlay showing photomosaic interpretations of the main architectural elements (GB, FM, etc.), lithofacies (G1, G2, S1, S2 ...etc.), sand units and bar complexes of the main sand sheets (units 1, 2, 312) and hierarchy of bedding contacts [(1), (2), (3)] 321
<i>Photo 7.24</i>	The middle part of the cliff-forming outcrop of the Clare Sandstone (the stratigraphic unit forming the Western Fluvial System), near the top of Mount Watermark west of Breeza, and a plastic overlay showing photomosaic interpretations of the main architectural elements (GB, FM, etc.), lithofacies (G1, G2, S1, S2 ...etc.), sand units and bar complexes of the main sand sheets (units 1, 2, 312) and hierarchy of bedding contacts [(1), (2), (3)]..... 322
<i>Photo 7.25</i>	The north-western part of the cliff-forming outcrop of the Clare Sandstone (the stratigraphic unit forming the Western Fluvial System), near the top of Mount Watermark west of Breeza, and a plastic overlay showing photomosaic interpretations of the main architectural elements (GB, FM, etc.), lithofacies (G1, G2, S1, S2 ...etc.), sand units and bar complexes of the main sand sheets (units 1, 2, 312) and hierarchy of bedding contacts [(1), (2), (3)] 323
<i>Photo 7.26</i>	Channel fill, lithic, mainly clast supported, pebble conglomerate of the Eastern Fluvial System in DM Gunnadilly DDH 1 331
<i>Photo 7.27</i>	Channel fill, lithic, clast and matrix supported, pebble to granule conglomerate of the Eastern Fluvial System in DM Breeza DDH 1 331
<i>Photo 7.28</i>	Channel fill, lithic, granule conglomerate and sandstone of the Eastern Fluvial System in DM Breeza DDH 1 331
<i>Photo 7.29</i>	Part of the Eastern Fluvial System in DM Gunnadilly DDH 1 showing floodplain facies (A) and bed-load tributary channel facies (B and C) 332
<i>Photo 7.30</i>	Climbing ripples in fine-grained sandstone/silty sandstone of the channel margin facies in DM Gunnadilly DDH 1 338
<i>Photo 7.31</i>	An excellent example of the floodplain facies of the Eastern Fluvial System in DM Brigalow DDH 2..... 339
CHAPTER 8: DEPOSITIONAL SETTING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON COAL DISTRIBUTION AND QUALITY OF THE UPPER BLACK JACK DEPOSITIONAL SEQUENCE	
<i>Photo 8.1</i>	Typical regressive sequence from the Arkarula shallow-marine system to the Hoskissons Coal in DM Millie DDH 1 348
<i>Photo 8.2</i>	Photomicrograph of inertodetrinite at the top of the Hoskissons Coal in DM Purlawaugh DDH1 showing detrital quartz grains embedded in the maceral ground mass 355

<i>Photo 8.3</i>	Photomicrograph of the Hoskissons Coal in DM Terrawinda DDH 1, showing a large detrital quartz grain inclusion in a ground mass consisting mostly of desmocollinite and semifusinite	355
<i>Photo 8.4</i>	A sequence from DM Bando DDH 1, in the central part of the Bando Trough, showing the Hoskissons Coal almost totally “shaled out” and replaced by organic-rich mudstone deposits of lake basin facies.	357
CHAPTER 9: PETROGRAPHIC COMPOSITION AND ENVIRONMENT OF PEAT FORMATION OF THE HOSKISSONS COAL		
<i>Photo 9.1</i>	Photomicrograph showing vitrinite in a coal ply at the base of the Hoskissons Coal in DM Springfield DDH 1.	383
<i>Photo 9.2</i>	Photomicrograph showing desmocollinite in the Hoskissons Coal in DM Turrawan DDH 1.	384
<i>Photo 9.3</i>	Photomicrograph of liptinite-rich coal (dominantly sporinite) in the Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 32.	385
<i>Photo 9.4</i>	Photomicrograph of alginite at the top of the Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 39.	385
<i>Photo 9.5</i>	Photomicrograph of inertinite-rich coal (mainly semifusinite and inertodetrinite) in the middle part of the Hoskissons Coal in DME Narrabri DDH 4.	386
<i>Photo 9.6</i>	Photomicrograph of inertodetrinite at the top of the Hoskissons Coal in DM Coogal DDH 1.	386
<i>Photo 9.7</i>	Photomicrograph showing macrinite surrounded by fusinite and semifusinite in the Hoskissons Coal in DM Turrawan DDH 1.	387
<i>Photo 9.8</i>	Photomicrograph of “attrital/detrital” inertodetrinite, fine-grained desmocollinite and abundant discrete and disseminated mineral matter - Hoskissons Coal in DM Purlawaugh DDH 1.	395
<i>Photo 9.9</i>	Photomicrograph of coal ply at the top of the Hoskissons Coal in DM Coogal DDH 1 showing common sporinite in a groundmass mostly of inertodetrinite and clay minerals.	398

TABLES

CHAPTER 2: LITHOSTRATIGRAPHY

<i>Table 2.1</i>	Previous stratigraphic schemes and nomenclature Gunnedah Basin.	38
<i>Table 2.2</i>	New lithostratigraphy for the Gunnedah Basin.	40
<i>Table 2.3</i>	Correlation of lithostratigraphy - Gunnedah and Sydney Basins.	113

CHAPTER 7: GENETIC FACIES ANALYSIS

<i>Table 7.1</i>	A. Architectural elements in fluvial deposits.	311
<i>Table 7.1</i>	B. Lithofacies classification and facies coding system of Miall (1978).	312

CHAPTER 9: PETROGRAPHIC COMPOSITION AND ENVIRONMENT OF PEAT FORMATION OF THE HOSKISSONS COAL

<i>Table 9.1</i>	Maceral terminology, source material and environment.	382
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CHAPTER 10: COAL RESOURCES OF THE GUNNEDAH BASIN

<i>Table 10.1</i>	Summary of the in situ coal resources of seams to 500 m depth, Gunnedah Basin.	417
<i>Table 10.2</i>	Coal resources, Maules Creek formation.	418
<i>Table 10.3</i>	Typical washed coal quality at CF 1.60 RD, Hoskissons seam.	422
<i>Table 10.4</i>	Coal, resources, Black Jack Group.	446
<i>Table 10.5</i>	Inferred resources amenable to underground mining, Aroona area.	448
<i>Table 10.6</i>	Inferred resources for the Hoskissons seam, Carroona area.	454
<i>Table 10.7</i>	Inferred resources for the Hoskissons and Melvilles seams, Breeza area.	461
<i>Table 10.8</i>	Coal quality data for the Hoskissons seam, West Gunnedah area.	470
<i>Table 10.9</i>	Inferred resources class 2 for the Hoskissons and Melvilles seams, West Gunnedah area.	473
<i>Table 10.10</i>	Inferred resources for the Hoskissons seam Narrabri area.	486
<i>Table 10.11</i>	Raw coal quality of the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Narrabri area.	488

	Page
<i>Table 10.12</i> Float/sink testing of the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Narrabri area	489
<i>Table 10.13</i> Washed coal quality of the potential working section of the Hoskissons seam, Narrabri area	489
<i>Table 10.14</i> Float/Sink testing of the potential working section of the Melvilles seam, Narrabri area	493
<i>Table 10.15</i> Raw and washed coal quality of the potential working section of the Melvilles seam, Narrabri area	493

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 BOREHOLE DATA, GUNNEDAH BASIN.....	531
Table A1.1 Gunnedah Basin borehole list	532
Table A1.2 Formations intersected in boreholes in the Gunnedah Basin	533
Table A1.3 Gunnedah Basin borehole locations.....	541
APPENDIX 2 STRATIGRAPHY AND STRUCTURE GUNNEDAH BASIN: BOREHOLE DATA	547
New lithostratigraphy for the Gunnedah Basin.....	opposite page 576
Table A2.1 Depth, RL and thickness data for the Triassic Digby and Napperby Formations and the overlying Surat Basin	548
Table A2.2 Depth, RL and thickness data for the Late Permian Black Jack Group	555
Table A2.3 Depth, RL and thickness data for the Permian Millie Group	562
Table A2.4 Depth, RL and thickness data for the Early Permian Bellata Group including (floor rocks of the Gunnedah Basin)	569
Table A2.5 Palynostratigraphy of the Gunnedah and Surat Basins.....	576
Table A2.6 Depth to base and thickness of intrusions in the Mullaley Sub-basin	577
Table A2.7 Depth to base and thickness of extrusions (Garrawilla Volcanics) in the Mullaley Sub-basin	583
APPENDIX 3 UPPER BLACK JACK DEPOSITIONAL SYSTEMS: BOREHOLE DATA	585
Table A3.1 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the upper part of the Black Jack Group.....	586
Table A3.2 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Hoskissons Coal and Caroon Coal Member in the southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	588
Table A3.3 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Hoskissons Coal/Caroon Coal Member and the Howes Hill Coal Member in the southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	589
Table A3.4 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Howes Hill Coal Member/Hoskissons Coal and the Breeza Coal Member in the southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	590
Table A3.5 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Breeza and Clift Coal Members in the southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	591
Table A3.6 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Clift and Springfield Coal Members in the southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	592
Table A3.7 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Springfield Coal Member and the Doona seam in the southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	593
Table A3.8 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Springfield Coal Member and the top of the Black Jack Group in the southern part of the Mullaley Sub-basin	594
Table A3.9 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the upper Black Jack depositional systems	595
Table A3.10 Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Hoskissons Coal and the top of the Breeza Coal Member and correlatives (Lacustrine and Western Fluvial Systems) in the Mullaley Sub-basin	598

Table A3.11	Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Hoskissons Coal and the top of the Howes Hill Coal Member and correlatives (Lacustrine and lower Western Fluvial Systems) in the Mullaley Sub-basin	601
Table A3.12	Thickness and net and percentage sandstone data for the interval between the Breeza Coal Member and its correlatives top of the Black Jack Group (Eastern Fluvial System) in the Mullaley Sub-basin	603
Table A3.13	Palaeocurrent data, Mount Watermark	606
APPENDIX 4	APPLICATION OF GEOPHYSICAL LOG FACIES TO GENETIC FACIES ANALYSIS - UPPER BLACK JACK SEQUENCE.....	607
	Reference.....	608
	Geophysical log facies interpretations.....	609 - 634
APPENDIX 5	ASH COMPOSITION AND SILICA/ALUMINA RATIOS FOR THE HOSKISSONS COAL	635
Table A5.1	Ash composition and silica/alumina ratios for the Hoskissons Coal	636
APPENDIX 6	PETROGRAPHIC COMPOSITION AND ENVIRONMENT OF PEAT FORMATION OF THE HOSKISSONS COAL: BOREHOLE DATA	639
Table A6.1	Maceral analysis of the Hoskissons Coal	640
Table A6.2	Maceral composition of the Hoskissons Coal - major plies	641
Table A6.3	Maceral composition of the Hoskissons Coal, northern Mullaley Sub-basin - seam sub-sections	643
Table A6.4	Gelification Index - GI for the Hoskissons Coal	645
Table A6.5	Tissue Preservation Index - TPI for the Hoskissons Coal.....	647
Table A6.6	Gelification Index - GI for the Hoskissons Coal - major plies	649
Table A6.7	Tissue Preservation Index - TPI for the Hoskissons Coal - major plies	651
Table A6.8	Gelification Index - GI for the Hoskissons Coal, northern Mullaley Sub-basin - seam sub-sections	653
Table A6.9	Tissue Preservation Index - TPI for the Hoskissons Coal, northern Mullaley Sub-basin - seam sub-sections	655
APPENDIX 7	COAL SEAM ANALYSES	657
Table A7.1	Data for coal seams of the Maules Creek Formation in the Mullaley Sub-basin	658
Table A7.2	Data for coal seams in the upper part of the Black Jack Group in the Mullaley Sub-basin	661
Table A7.3	Data for coal seams in the lower part of the Black Jack Group Brothers Sub-group) in the Mullaley Sub-basin	673
Table A7.4	Raw and washed coal analyses for the Hoskissons seam	677
Table A7.5	Raw and washed coal analyses for a selected low (<17%) ash working section within the Hoskissons seam.....	681

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1. TADROS N.Z. 1982. Geology and coal resources west of Boggabri. *Geological Survey of New South Wales, Quarterly Notes* **48**, 2-14.
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